



“Kalvi” Gopalakrishnan

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From apiculturist to illustrator to writer—that is “Kalvi” Gopalakrishnan. He ran a journal called *Kalvi* for a number of years; hence the prefix to his name. An apt title for him, because “Kalvi” means “literature,” in Tamil, and within the past couple of decades or so, Gopalakrishnan has won more than a dozen literary awards for his books for children and neo-literates, from the State Government, the Central Government and UNESCO.

When I met him first, I found it difficult to believe that this soft-spoken gentleman with honest eyes peering from under bushy eyebrows, had once said: “I don’t know how to write. Moreover, writing for

children is not an easy task. I shall not do it.” But the editor of a well-known Tamil weekly was insistent, and Gopalakrishnan began to write. From that day, short stories for children flowed from his pen. They were published and applauded by the young reader. A little later, the editor said: “You must now write full length fiction,” Gopalakrishnan once again refused. “Eh? Novels? No, never. I am incapable of writing them.” But the adamant editor did not relent. Eventually, Gopalakrishnan wrote his first full length story, *Parakkum Pappa* (The Flying Doll).

The story is about a paper doll cut out from a sheet of newspaper by the boy,

Mani. He utters some magic words that he had newly learnt from a magician, and the paper doll begins to fly. It flies along with the wind fairy and comes to know many interesting things about children all over the world. *Parakkum Pappa* won for its author his first award—the Children's Literature Award of the Government of India in 1959.

Born in a large family in the year 1912, Gopalakrishnan spent his childhood with his maternal uncle in Triplicane, Madras. His neighbours were great literary men like Subramanya Bharathi. But literary talents or scholastic aptitude did not manifest themselves in young Gopalakrishnan, and he had nothing to do with his scholarly neighbours. In fact he was a day-dreamer often lying flat on his back and gazing at the roofs and walls to identify familiar shapes or figures out of the chipped whitewash. This, perhaps, reflected the artistic talents of the boy.

As a child, Gopalakrishnan hardly read any books. For the bare-bodied school boy, sitting after school-hours in front of a flickering chimney lamp, with mosquitoes hovering around, reading was no great pleasure. But, he recalls, there were three books that he read and re-read with pleasure. They made a lasting impression on the young boy's mind. They were, a profusely illustrated edition of *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and the works of Edgar Allan Poe. The impact of these can be felt in Gopalakrishnan's books, in which he makes a delightful combination of reality, and fantastic imagination woven into unusual adventures, lighted with touch of humour.

Poor health stood in the way of higher studies, whereupon, young Gopalakrishnan turned his attention, to a correspondence course in art, as well as an apiary consisting of a dozen bee colonies. At the age of twenty-six, he wrote his first work, an article on apiculture in the journal entitled

The Gardener. It was well received, and Gopalakrishnan continued to contribute to the journal. But, never for a moment did he imagine at that time, that he had an ability to write for children.

The artist in him urged Gopalakrishnan to take up illustrating of textbooks. But he found that publishers not only exploited the artist but treated them with scant courtesy. The artist found no encouragement to bloom.

It was mere chance that threw Gopalakrishnan into the field of writing for children. He began writing with astonishing simplicity that fascinated the young reader. He climbed up the ladder of success with amazing rapidity, and soon his award-winning piece *Parakkum Pappa* was born.

"After the success of *Parakkum Pappa*, I realized that science and other worldly information could be imparted to children less painfully than through textbooks, by giving it to them in the garb of fiction. Thenceforth, that is what I concentrated on, and all the books so written have won awards," said Gopalakrishnan with a glimmer of pride.

"The secret of writing for children successfully lies in reading the all-time favourites of children with a critical eye, picking out the ingredients that tend to attract children to these books, and trying to adopt them in one's own writings. It is not necessary to be with children in order to write for them, in which case, all primary school teachers and mothers of large families would be the best children's writers. But, it is necessary that the writer be a keen observer of children and understand them. He should watch their actions and reactions, absorb their interests and behaviour, and realize how they chance to look upon the wonders of the world that surround them," advises Gopalakrishnan. He himself has learnt a lot from such time-tested favourites as

Alice in Wonderland, Grimms' and Andersen's fairy tales.

For writing on scientific topics, Gopalakrishnan reads extensively, untiringly, almost all the popular books on the particular topic that he intends to tackle. He takes down notes that may run into hundreds of pages. Of all this he distils the essence in his fine tale-telling style. "The manuscripts of all my major books have been written, corrected and rewritten at least fifteen times each," admits the renowned author.

In his book, *Pathala Ulagil Parakkum Pappa*, the Flying Doll continues its journey into the depths of the ocean with the water fairy, to look at life under the sea, and learn of the biology of the ocean. This book won the literary award of the Government of Tamil Nadu.

The Flying Doll, itching for more travel, next goes well back in time, and witnesses the beginnings of life on earth. *Pandal Ulagil Parakkum Pappa* is the theory of evolution made fascinating to the child, through the eyes of the Flying Doll. This book won the Government of India Literary award.

Adventures of the Sugar Doll (Mittai Pappa) takes the child through the bee and ant colonies. *Mayavigal* tells him all about microbes, and *Thotru Noigalum Taduppu Muraigalum*, about immunology. All these won the Neo-literates Award. One really wonders how such subjects could be made delightfully readable for the beginner reader. As a proof of the pudding, one librarian commented to the author: "Sir, your books in my library are in a most pitiable condition."

"Why? Why are they so badly neglected?"

"Oh, no. I mean that in the entire library, only your books are in tatters because they are the most read ones!"

Early morning hours are inspiring, and that is when the author engages himself

in writing, and produces ten to fifteen pages of a draft of the manuscript. Nights are for revising, rewriting, and polishing. Before the final manuscript is ready, there would have been at least a dozen drafts. "There are no short cuts to producing a good manuscript. It is produced with as much perspiration, if not more, as inspiration."

Awards have been many to Gopalakrishnan. Even some of the manuscripts produced in the writers workshops conducted by him have won awards. Nevertheless, the best judges of children's books are the children themselves. Says the author, "My joy knows no bounds when children happily recollect the pleasure they experienced when they read *Parakkum Pappa* or any of my other books. My cup of joy will be full if children all over India can read and enjoy my books." How can children all over India read Tamil books?

"By means of translation," comes the immediate reply.

A literary agency or a translation society can act on behalf of popular authors or publishers of different regions and undertake translation of their books. Since the same art work and blocks can be used for the various languages, the cost of production will go down. Publications divisions of the state governments could help in distributing these books to the various school libraries, etc. The librarians can play a significant role in popularising children's literature. With a keen eye, they can pinpoint the favourites of the young members of their libraries. Such books can be put before an expert reviewing committee to recommend them for further editions and translations.

A number of years of experience as a writer for children provokes Gopalakrishnan to advise budding young writers not to dabble in all forms of children's literature. For the first year to two, perhaps,

the writer may try his hand in the various forms—short story, poetry, drama, satire, humour, adventure, non-fiction, etc. But, ultimately, he should realize his natural inclination, and select the medium that comes to him most effortlessly and concentrate on this particular form of literature for his future writings. In this way, he is sure to come to the top.

Gopalakrishnan is not very happy with the present state of children's literature in the country. No children's writer can live by writing alone. There are very few exceptions. With a pot-boiler job on hand, the person can concentrate on writing only in his spare time. One cannot expect very good quality of writing, as such. Artists, too, are exploited. Hence, art work, which is a very important aspect of children's literature, also deteriorates.

The publishing field, by and large, is in the hands of men who are keen on making a fast buck, and not really interested in bringing out good literature. Even the so-called literary bodies in the country are plagued with groupism and favouritism. Unless some remedy is sought, good literary pieces cannot come to the fore. They will wither like desert flowers, unknown and unheard of. "The several seminars on children's literature that I have attended at various times all over the country have passed many resolutions and recommendations. But, there has been no follow up of the same," says Gopala-

krishnan. "Hence we see no practical improvement in children's literature."

Gopalakrishnan's practical suggestions are worthy of implementation. Ultimately, he says, it is the child reader who decides the fate of a piece of children's literature. Hence, make sure that you write in order to fascinate young minds. Moreover, the rural child, who has hitherto been deprived of good reading material, must be made to read. Therefore, market your books in the villages. The landowner there is rich. But he does not know about buying books for his child. So, take the books to him, and let him buy. The more he buys, the more will be published, and more writers will write. The vicious circle is bound to break, and children's literature will develop. As an outstation member of the AWIC, Gopalakrishnan shows keen interest in the activities of the association. "Hold exhibitions in schools of good children's books, and encourage the children to buy Indian books. The more the books sell, the more will you write," says he.

Today, at the ripe age of seventy-one, Kalvi Gopalakrishnan does not sit idle in his cozy home at Adyar, in Madras. His active, restless mind is forever reading, observing and writing. As if that is not enough, he is planning to thrill children and neo-literates with puppetry!

I conclude, wishing many more years of active life for the accomplished writer, to gladden the hearts of thousands of children in India.

Thousand at One Stroke!

KALVI GOPALAKRISHNAN

Madam Fly came flying, her body dripping with honey. She sat on a house top and began to hum:

"Tra .. la .. la .. laa ..."

Jolly Ho! Life is so sweet!

Tra .. la .. la .. laa ...", all the time licking her body clean of the honey. The reason for honey dripping from her body was nothing but her fall into a honey pot. If she had drowned, it would have been the end of her and this story as well! But, she struggled hard to save herself from drowning, and managed to escape with dear life.

Presently, Madam Mosquito flew straight at the fly and alighted beside her. She screamed: "You fool! How dare you sing merrily, while your life is in danger! Beware! The humans are planning to wipe you and your clan clean out of this world."

"What? What did you say? Who is going to kill us? The humans? Why should they, when we have done them no harm? Don't spread false rumours," shouted the fly.

"Hear me, good friend. I am not spreading rumours. The humans are saying that you and your kind kill them by the thousands!"

"Ha, ha! Do the humans say so? If so, it is a compliment indeed!" boasted the fly.

"Compliment or no compliment, they are dead earnest in wiping out you and your clan," warned the mosquito.

"Well! Well then! Show me the person who had the cheek to talk ill of us." So saying, Madam Fly took to her wings, with Madam Mosquito leading the way.

They soon arrived at the village where scores of villagers were assembled. One of them was lecturing, "If I say that the fly is the foremost killer of man, it is nothing but the truth. Even the terrible man-eater, the tiger, kills only one man at a time. But, this horrible fly kills thousands at one stroke.

"How is that?" asked one from the audience.

"These filthy flies relish everything that is dirty. While feeding on dirty things, the fly spits out digestive juices, and then sucks in the dissolved matter, which is laden with germs. After this, the same fly alights on our food. While doing so, it transfers dangerous disease—germs to our food. These disease—germs enter our body when we eat our food. In no time they multiply by the millions and make us sick. Diseases like cholera, dysentery, and typhoid and tuberculosis are spread

amongst us by the flies, and millions die of these diseases," explained the speaker.

Cries such as: "Horrible! Down with the fly! Swat the fly!" rent the air.

"You will agree that we should get rid of these murderers. I shall now explain how to do it. The adult fly lays eggs in rubbish heaps. When the eggs hatch, white larvae emerge. These burrow into the rubbish heaps and feed on the decaying matter there. Now, if we spread soil on the rubbish heaps where the larvae thrive, and bury them forever, before they turn into young flies, we shall be rid of them.

"Murder! Murder! Ho! How cruel to kill our innocent babies in their cradles. Ho! Is that your plan of action?" cried the fly and turned round to her friend, the mosquito to enlist her support. "Come, my friend. We will join together and destroy all the humans before they put into practice this dastardly plan." But, the mosquito was not to be seen. At that precise moment, the human speaker slapped his ear and cried "WOW", with pain. "Ho! It is the nasty mosquito that is biting me. Perhaps she is angry that I have not mentioned anything about her. Now that she has reminded me, let me tell you about her, also. The mosquito is the second greatest enemy of mankind. While the fly spreads various diseases by depositing the germs in our food, the mosquito injects the germs in our blood itself. Diseases like malaria, filaria, and sleeping sickness are caused by the mosquitoes," explained the speaker.

"Is that so?" exclaimed many voices from the audience.

"Yes. I shall explain in detail. When the mosquito bites and sucks the blood of persons suffering from various diseases, the disease germs in the blood of the sick persons are sucked up, too. When the mosquito later bites a healthy person the disease germs slip into his blood stream."

Continued on page 16

Continued from page 10

"Oh! How horrible! How do we get rid of these devils?"

"Listen, comrades! The mother mosquitoes choose to lay their eggs in liquid filth, i.e. in stagnant dirty pools of water. When the egg hatches, a tiny larva emerges. The larva eats and thrives on the dirt in the stagnant water, breathes like a fish and grows rapidly. As it grows bigger and bigger, its outer skin bursts, and a pupa emerges. The pupa cannot breathe like a fish and has to come to the surface of the water to breathe. This is the proper time to put an end to its life," explained the speaker.

"How do we get rid of these devils?" asked one among the audience.

"All we have to do is pour a little oil on the surface of the stagnant water. The oil will form a thin film over the surface of the water. The pupa cannot come through the film of oil, and breathe fresh air. Thus, all pupae will suffocate and die.

"Ho, ho! Let the two of us and our clan join hands and wage a war against the humans," the mosquito suggested to the fly. "Let us spread deadly disease jointly amongst them and kill them all."

"Let us go and begin to act at once," cried Madam Fly.

But before the fly and the mosquito could fly away, "Stop there!" snapped a deadly voice. A blood red tongue shot out towards Madam Fly. Before she could

realize what was happening, she was stuck to the red tongue. The next moment she was slipping down a red tunnel.

"Ha, ha, ha! Evil one! You can do no harm now. You are safely tucked inside my tummy," said the owner of the red tongue, the lizard, and smacked his lips. "I shall hunt you rascals wherever I see your kind and imprison everyone of you in my roomy tummy. I will stop you and your kin from doing any harm to the humans. They give me shelter from the rain and sun. I am duty bound to help them."

While the tongue of the lizard swooped on Madam Fly, the wily mosquito escaped and flew away. But, she too did not live long. While she was flying, her dreaded enemy, the dragon fly swooped down at her like a jet plane.

"Ho, my life! Spare my life!" wailed the mosquito, as she flew hither and thither to escape from the clutches of the dragon fly. But it was of no avail. In a trice, she was caught by the forelegs of the dragon fly. It then bit the body of Madam Mosquito and made a hearty meal of her.

Hurrah to the two hunters, the lizard and the dragon fly who hunt the evil flies and mosquitoes relentlessly. Let us say Hip! Hip! Hurrah! to the good samaritans!

(Translated from the original
by Indira Ananthakrishnan)